

Message Text

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AMEMBASSY BEIRUT
AMEMBASSY CAIRO
AMEMBASSY JIDDA
AMEMBASSY KUWAIT
AMEMBASSY TEL AVIV
AMEMBASSY TRIPOLI
AMCONSUL JERUSALEM
USLO RIYADH
SECDEF WASHDC
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C O N F I D E N T I A L DAMASCUS 1114

C O R R E C T E D C O P Y (TEXT)

E.O. 11652: GDS
TAGS: PEPR, SY, LE
SUBJECT: PROSPECTS FOR RENEWED SYRO-LEBANESE FIGHTING

SUMMARY: THE POLITICAL FACTORS UNDERLYING THE RECENT SYRO-
LEBANESE FIGHTING MAKE IT LIKELY THAT SUCH INCIDENTS WILL
REOCCUR. THE SYRIANS SEEM TO LACK A COHERENT STRATEGY IN
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REOCCUR. THE SYRIANS SEEM TO LACK A COHERENT STRATEGY IN
LEBANON AND MOST LOCAL LEADERS BELIEVE THAT LEBANON IS
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BECOMING SYRIA'S "VIET-NAM". ASSAD, ABOVE ALL ELSE, FEARS
LARGE-SCALE ISRAELI INTERVENTION. THUS, HE WILL NOT BE ANXIOUS
FOR A MAJOR CONFRONTATION WITH THE LEBANESE HHINYIST
MILITIAS. NEVERTHELESS, SYRIAN CLUMSINESS COUPLED WITH AN
ABUNDANCE OF POTENTIAL PROVACATEURS COULD WELL GALVANIZE
ANTI-SYRIAN FEELINGS, LEADING TO THE RESULTS HE MOST
WISHES TO AVOID. RENEWED LARGE-SCALE FIGHTING IN LEBANON

COULD DASH HOPES RAISED BY SADAT'S INITIATIVES. END SUMMARY

1. ALTHOUGH FIGHTING IN THE LEBANON BETWEEN SYRIAN ADF TROOPS AND LEBANESE ARMY/RIGHTIST FACTIONS HAS CEASED, POLITICAL FACTORS IN BOTH COUNTRIES MAKE REPETITION OF SUCH EVENTS ALL TOO LIKELY. THIS FIGHT HAD BEEN BREWING FOR SOME TIME AND GAVE THE MOST TANGIBLE EVIDENCE TO DATE OF THE GROWING DISPARITIES BETWEEN SYRIAN AND LEBANESE CHRISTIAN PERCEPTIONS AND GOALS. THE RIGHTWING CHRISTIANS EVIDENTLY BELIEVE THEY WON THE 1976 WAR AND SHOULD BE ALLOWED TO ACT ACCORDINGLY. FURTHERMORE, LEBANESE FROM ALMOST ALL FACTIONS HAVE TRADITIONAL CONTEMPT FOR SYRIANS AND DISTRUST THEIR INTENTIONS. ASSAD, FOR HIS PART, RESENTS THEIR SEEMING LACK OF GRATITUDE AND HIS INABILITY TO WEAN AWAY AN IMPORTANT SEGMENT OF THE LEBANESE RIGHT FROM THEIR TIES WITH ISRAEL. RECENT POLITICAL CLEAVAGES IN THE ARAB WORLD DICTATED THAT HE INCREASE HIS COOPERATION WITH THE PLO, FURTHER HEIGHTENING SYRO-CHRISTIAN TENSIONS.

2. SYRIAN INTENTIONS IN LEBANON, BEYOND THEIR STATED GOALS OF MAINTAINING THE COUNTRY'S UNITY AND SECURITY UNTIL A POLITICAL FORMULA CAN BE ARRANGED WHICH WOULD ALLOW THE REBUILDING OF NATIONAL INSTITUTIONS INCLUDING THE ARMY, HAVE NEVER BEEN CLEAR. SINCE THE END OF THE CIVIL WAR, SYRIAN TACTICS HAVE HAD A HAPHAZARD, IMPROVISATIONAL QUALITY, SUGGESTING THAT THE ASSAD REGIME

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IS OPERATING WITHOUT A CLEAR PLAN AND IS MORE OFTEN THAN NOT RESPONDING TO EVENTS RATHER THAN SHAPING THEM.

3. IN THIS CONTEXT, AS BUTROS COMMENTED TO AMBASSADOR PARKER, THE FIGHTING MAY HAVE BEEN BENEFICIAL TO THE EXTENT THAT THE SYRIANS BECAME AWARE OF THE HOSTILITY THEIR PROLONGED PRESENCE IS AROUSING AND THE LIMITS OF THEIR MILITARY POWER TO SHAPE POLITICAL EVENTS IN LEBANON.

4. MOST LOCAL OBSERVERS HERE BELIEVE THAT ASSAD IS SINKING INTO A QUAGMIRE OR, MORE CRUDELY, THAT SYRIA HAS FOUND "ITS VIET-NAM". OUR INTERLOCUTORS TELL US THAT ASSAD CANNOT WITHDRAW SYRIAN FORCES IN THE FORESEEABLE FUTURE SINCE NEW FIGHTING WOULD INEVITABLY OCCUR IN LEBANON, CALLING INTO QUESTION THE WISDOM OF HIS POLICIES THERE. ON THE OTHER HAND, THE SPECTRE OF LARGE NUMBERS OF SYRIAN SOLDIERS DYING IN LEBANON AT THE HANDS OF SYRIA'S FORMER RIGHTIST ALLIES HAS THE POTENTIAL TO SPARK DOMESTIC POLITICAL UNREST. UNDERLYING ALL THIS IS THE RARELY DISCUSSED BUT RECURRENT SYRIAN NIGHTMARE THAT IT WILL BE EMBROILED IN A WAR WITH ISRAEL, NOT OF ITS CHOOSING, OVER LEBANON. ANOTHER RELATED PREOCCUPATION NOW SURFACING

AMONG SYRIA' LEADERS IS THE LACK OF DISCIPLINE AMONG SYRIAN TROOPS IN LEBANON. REPORTS ARE INCREASING ABOUT THE DIFFICULTIES OFFICERS ARE HAVING EXERCISING EFFECTIVE CONTROL OVER THEIR UNITS.

5. FOR THESE REASON, ASSAD IS NOT ANXIOUS FOR AN ALL-OUT CONFRONTATION WITH THE LEBANESE RIGHT. HE KNOWS WELL THE DANGERS SUCH FIGHTING WOULD ENTAIL FOR SYRIA. HE IS ESPECIALLY FEARFUL OF INCREASED ISRAELI INVOLVEMENT. NEVERTHELESS, HE CANNOT AFFORD TO PERMIT THE RIGHTISTS TO HAVE THEIR WAY. A RECENT ASSAD STATEMENT TO THE PRESS BEFORE THE LATEST FIGHTING INDICATED HE WAS PREPARED TO TOLERATE SOME LIMITED ADMINISTRATIVE DECENTRALIZATION, BUT IN OUR VIEW NOTHING WHICH HE WOULD SEETO AS CARRYING CONFIDENTIAL

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THE SEEDS OF EVENTUAL PARTITION.

6. RECENT REDEPLOYMENTS OF SYRIAN TROOPS IN LEBANON AND MY TALKS WITH KHADDAM SUGGEST THAT THE SYRIANS WILL TRY TO DECREASE THE VULNERABILITY OF THEIR MEN TO RANDOM ATTACKS AND WILL MOVE QUICKLY AND IN STRENGTH TO ISOLATE AND CRUSH ANY PROVOCATION TO THEIR FORCES BEFORE IT CAN SPREAD. UNFORTUNATELY, SYRIAN OFFICERS, STILL SMARTING FROM THEIR RECENT HUMILIATION, ARE MORE LIKELY THAN EVER TO BE HEAVY-HANDED AND INDISCRIMATE IN SILENCING FIRE DIRECTED AT THEM EVEN IF THEIR ORDERS FROM DAMASCUS ARE TO ACT WITH RESTRAINT. THIS WILL INEVITABLY MEAN MORE CIVILIAN CASUALTIES IN BUILT-UP AREAS WHICH WILL FURTHER ALIENATE THE LEBANESE PUBLIC AND PLAY INTO THE HANDS OF EXTREMIST POLITICIANS AND MILITIA LEADERS. IN THE CURRENT SITUATION, EXTREMISTS CAN INSTIGATE BLOODY CONFRONTATIONS WITH UNPREDICTABLE CONSEQUENCES EVEN WHEN A LARGE MAJORITY OF THE PEOPLE WOULD CPREFER TO AVOID BLOOKSHED. THERE ARE MANY FORCES IN THE REGION AND LEBANON WHICH OPPOSE SYRIA'S CONTINUED PRESENCE IN LEBANON, AND WISH TO RESHAPE LEBANON TO THEIR OWN VISION. SRIAN CLUMSINESS COULD WELL GALVANIZE ANTI-SYRIAN FEELINGS, LEADING TO THE SCENARIOS THEY MOST WISH TO AVOID.

7. THE 1975-76 CIVIL WAR IN LEBANON PREOCCUPIED MOST OF THE EASTERN ARAB WORLD AND HELPED FRUSTRATE ANY INITIATIVES FOR AN ARAB-ISRAELI PEACE SETTLEMENT AFTER SINAIHII. RENEWED LARGE-SCALE FIGHTING IN LEBANON THIS YEAR COULD SIMILARLY DASH THE HOPES RAISED BY SADAT'S JERUSALEM VISIT FOR CONTINUED PROGRESS TOWARDS A COMPREHENSIVE SETTLEMENT. MURPHY

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